



Doing research in conflict settings: gender mainstreaming and ethics

Saferworld, International Alert, Conciliation Resources

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Peace Research Partnership workshop report
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Saferworld, Conciliation Resources and International Alert are collaborating on a three-year research programme which generates evidence and lessons for policy-makers and practitioners on how to support peaceful, inclusive change in conflict-affected areas. Funded by UK aid from the UK government, the research focuses on economic development, peace processes, institutions and gender drivers of conflict.

Cover photo credit: Saferworld staff member speaks to a community member about their experience of land conflict in Otuke, northern Uganda. Credit: Saferworld/ Alexandra Azúa Hale

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Abbreviations

FGD	Focus group discussion
KII	Key informant interview
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
PRP	Peace Research Partnership
SGBV	Sexual and gender-based violence

Executive summary

Since 2017, Saferworld, International Alert and Conciliation Resources have worked together in the Peace Research Partnership (PRP), a three-year programme funded with UK aid from the UK government. The PRP conducts research in conflict-affected regions on inclusive economic development, peace processes and institutions, and on identifying how gender dynamics can drive conflict or peace.¹ ‘Gender mainstreaming’ – or the infusion of gender analysis into all aspects of research – continues to be a central component of the programme. This report outlines lessons from six case studies and workshop discussions with representatives of consortium research teams, which took place in London in November 2018.

Overall, the lessons and recommendations across the case studies have been grouped into three categories that capture different stages of research, from inception and design to data collection and dissemination: 1) composition of research teams; 2) engaging with research participants; and 3) ethics and the purpose of research.

Composition of research teams:

- a) As far as possible, research teams should have an equal balance of women and men. But in many cases – and especially in conflict settings – it may be equally important to ensure diversity in terms of ethnicity, caste, clan, age and other ‘identity markers’ in addition to gender. As reflected across a number of the case studies and discussions, where gender advisers worked closely with research teams, there were clearer findings on how gender related to conflict dynamics and peacebuilding. This demonstrates the importance of having gender adviser roles within any organisation conducting research in conflict-affected regions.
- b) Working with community-based partners can greatly benefit research. However,

research teams need to bring partners in at the earliest stages of the process to ensure their buy-in and understanding of the approaches and potential sensitivities of the research. This also builds capacity of staff and partners and draws on partner expertise and knowledge of the context.

- c) Finally, the wellbeing and safeguarding of researchers needs to be planned and resourced in advance. There is a lot of pressure placed on research teams, who are often working in difficult, stressful circumstances and may need to discuss highly sensitive issues. It is crucial to support their access to services dealing with stress, secondary trauma, re-traumatisation or other wellbeing issues, if needed.

Engaging with research participants:

- a) It became clear that in some cases research participants come from over-researched groups, which can lead to research fatigue and disillusionment of participants. This has obvious ethical consequences, but can also affect the validity of the data gathered. While this is an issue for research more broadly, it has particular implications when conducting research on sensitive gender issues such as sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Research teams and leads must recognise when not to research, as much as knowing when to research – and these decisions should be supported by organisational environments that prioritise and enable gender mainstreaming and safeguarding concerns across research and programming activities.
- b) Training researchers to use a number of methods (key informant interviews [KIIs], focus group discussions [FGDs], surveys) is important to ensure rigorous research. Building in flexibility and combining a range of methods improves the quality of research.
- c) In patriarchal and socially conservative societies, research methods may need to be adapted to ensure women’s participation,

¹ Saferworld, International Alert and Conciliation Resources, GSRA (Global Security Rapid Analysis) Programme Guidance Note – Gender Mainstreaming, March 2018

especially that of younger women, as well as people of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, in ways that do not put them at risk.

- d) It is essential to put duty of care to research participants at the heart of research to minimise distress or risks for participants. For instance, if re-traumatisation occurs, are there support mechanisms such as counselling services to which an interviewee can be referred?

Ethics and the purpose of research:

- a) It is crucial to ensure that research teams, whether composed of staff or partners, are properly trained in gender-sensitive research methods and ethical research. Building partner capacity can lead to less reliance on (primarily) Western-based consultants,

and enables partners and local staff to have ownership of the research.

- b) One way to ensure ethical research and safeguarding is to develop rigorous ethical guidelines and standards, adapted to the needs and circumstances of civil society organisation-led research. This takes time, but when done correctly it generates not only more ethical research, but also more reliable data.
- c) Finally, it is important to reflect on the overall purpose of research. Will the research result in a report that simply gathers dust? Or is it designed in a way that gives back to communities and contributes to sustainable peacebuilding? Putting these questions front and centre guarantees more ethical research and also enables researchers to be a part of transformative processes in the communities where they work.

1. Introduction and background

Since 2017, Saferworld, International Alert and Conciliation Resources have worked together in the Peace Research Partnership (PRP). Funded with UK aid from the UK government, the three-year programme involves conducting research in conflict-affected regions, focusing on inclusive economic development, peace processes and institutions, and on identifying how gender dynamics can drive conflict or peace.² ‘Gender mainstreaming’ – or the infusion of gender analysis into all aspects of research – is a central component of the programme.

To reflect honestly on the challenges of mainstreaming gender, as well as on current gender-specific research, the three peacebuilding organisations organised a cross-organisational workshop on 21–23 November 2018³ to:

1. Analyse and reflect, through case studies, on how the three learning documents⁴ have been implemented across the various research strands for the duration of the PRP and how this can be improved in future;
2. Identify, address and plan how to overcome challenges and gaps on mainstreaming gender throughout the project, and share and learn from best practices;
3. Develop actionable recommendations and learning for projects in years 2 and 3; and
4. Review ethical challenges, lessons learned and plans for addressing risk and ethical considerations, taking into account each organisation’s values and safeguarding policies.

Over two days, the workshop covered six pieces of research – discussed using a case study format – with each at a different stage of the research process, from inception and design to data collection, dissemination and outreach. The case studies covered research focusing on:

1. People’s perspectives on peacebuilding in northeast Nigeria (Conciliation Resources and the Kukah Centre);⁵
2. How conflict has changed gender roles in Yemen in domestic, economic, social and political spheres (Saferworld);
3. Understanding how gender roles, norms and expectations impact on joining, serving with and disengaging from armed forces and groups in Ukraine (International Alert);
4. Peace-sensitive livelihoods for inclusive economic development and the role of the private sector in Nepal (International Alert);
5. How decentralisation affects political inclusion in Kenya (Saferworld);⁶ and
6. Lessons and insights on how partnerships with local civil society organisations support inclusive and transformative peace (Conciliation Resources).⁷

The final half-day of the workshop was dedicated to ethics and safeguarding in research – an important consideration given the increased focus on ethical practices and safeguarding requirements within the development and aid sectors. This report, based on the workshop discussions, aims to provide the following:

- A background to some of the central issues discussed during the workshop.

² Saferworld, International Alert and Conciliation Resources, 2018, Op. cit.

³ The workshop was organised and planned by the three gender leads within each organisation. It was facilitated by Synne L. Dyvik (University of Sussex).

⁴ These are documents developed by the consortium to guide teams in their research. These include PRP Checklist for Gender Mainstreaming, Guidance Note for Gender Mainstreaming and Gender, Ethics and Risk Guidelines.

⁵ Through our eyes: People’s perspectives on building peace in northeast Nigeria, Conciliation Resources, <https://www.c-r.org/resources/through-our-eyes>

⁶ Delivering on the promise of peace? Devolution in Isiolo, Kenya, Saferworld, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/news-and-analysis/post/788-delivering-on-the-promise-of-peace-devolution-in-isiolo-kenya->

⁷ Partnership in peacebuilding, Conciliation Resources, <https://www.c-r.org/resources/partnership-peacebuilding>

- An analysis of the cross-cutting challenges and lessons from the six case studies.
- A reflection on overall challenges relating to gender mainstreaming, ethics and safeguarding, as well as recommendations.

1.1 Gender mainstreaming

To understand gender mainstreaming, it is necessary to define 'gender' itself. The PRP consortium members use 'gender' to refer to the ways in which people are socially, culturally and historically categorised as 'girls' and 'boys', 'women' and 'men', and the effect this has on their everyday lives. These categorisations are most often (but not always) aligned with biological sex assigned at birth, and their meanings vary greatly from society to society and change over time. A person's gender shapes their everyday life in terms of access to services, rights, privileges and roles in society, as well as how they understand themselves. The meanings it holds and its effects on individuals and societies are fluid, and so can change (for example, before, during and after conflict). Gender is therefore not a synonym for 'women',⁸ but looks at relations between women and men, girls and boys in every society, influencing how they are organised and how power and resources are distributed among their populations.

Since the mid-1990s, gender mainstreaming has become the main strategic and policy framework for ensuring women's participation in state bureaucracies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations.⁹ The Department for International Development (DFID) defines it as "a process to ensure that women's and men's (or boys' and girls') and those with other gender identities' concerns and experiences are integral to the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all legislation, policies and programmes".¹⁰

From the beginning, gender mainstreaming has been criticised for not fulfilling its goal of realising greater equality between men and women. To understand why, researchers need to consider two gender mainstreaming approaches – integrationist and transformational.¹¹ Where the former tends to focus on the 'value' of integrating gender into research, the latter focuses on the transformational effect a gender mainstreaming approach can have on organisations, policies and practices. In the 'integrationist' approach, gender mainstreaming itself becomes the goal; in the latter, it is gender equality and changing power relations.

During the workshop, participants reflected on where their organisations 'sit' along this spectrum. While most agreed that the PRP aspires to the 'transformational' approach, many said that this is not the current reality. For example, gender specialists pointed to the challenge of getting everyone to take ownership of integrating gender into their research, rather than outsourcing gender concerns to gender advisers or leads. Workshop attendees also discussed the challenges of language and terminology, and participants were encouraged to nurture a *feminist curiosity*¹² that encourages thinking of gender as something that enables researchers to better understand research participants and their contexts.

1.2 Ethics and safeguarding in research

Planning, coordinating and conducting research in conflict or post-conflict settings is always challenging. The combination of security concerns, time pressures, sensitivities and coordination between partners means that it can be hard to ensure ethical and safeguarding concerns are always central to each phase of research. In March 2018, the PRP developed a series of guiding principles to embed gender-related ethics and risks into

⁸ T. Carver, *Gender is not a synonym for women*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishing, 1995

⁹ G. Caglar, *Gender mainstreaming*, *Politics & Gender*, 9(3), 2013, pp.336–344

¹⁰ Guidance note on gender mainstreaming and social exclusion in research, DFID, https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130603153753/http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/pdf/publications/guidancenote_gender&se.pdf

¹¹ M. Mukhopadhyay, *Mainstreaming gender or reconstituting the mainstream? Gender knowledge in development*, *Journal of International Development*, 26(3), 2014, pp.356–367

¹² C. Enloe, *A conversation with Cynthia Enloe on curiosity, confidence, and feminist questions*, *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 38(2), 2014, pp.13–22



Participants discuss gender mainstreaming during the November 2018 workshop. Credit: Mike Bradford

its research guidelines. These principles are grounded in securing informed consent and the baseline principle of ‘do no harm’.¹³ The guidelines emphasise, among other things, the importance of training for staff; understanding the potential risks posed by research; ensuring referral processes and support are in place for research participants; and that there are efforts to ensure confidentiality and anonymity at every stage of the research. During the workshop, a number of cross-cutting concerns revealed the extent of ethical challenges associated with conducting research in conflict-affected societies, highlighting the importance of these principles and of ensuring researchers are familiar with them.

Safeguarding is related to research ethics but it incorporates a wider set of organisational practices relating to both research participants and researchers themselves. Bond – the UK network for organisations working in international

development – defines safeguarding as “the responsibility that organisations have to make sure their staff, operations and programmes do no harm to children and vulnerable adults, and that they do not expose them to the risk of harm and abuse”.¹⁴ Safeguarding is not about the risks posed by conflict-affected environments in general (for example, security concerns or the natural environment), but instead is about the risks posed by organisations and programmes (for example, sexual exploitation and abuse by staff, risks posed to people participating in research, or re-traumatisation). In other words, it is about the risks researchers pose to others through their actions and research practices. While all three partner organisations in the PRP recognise that there is still some way to go in terms of embedding safeguarding into everything they do, they are also working to strengthen their safeguarding policies and practices. Much like the different approaches to gender mainstreaming – ‘integrationist’ and

¹³ Saferworld, International Alert and Conciliation Resources, GSRA (Global Security Rapid Analysis) Programme Guidance Note – Gender Mainstreaming, March 2018

¹⁴ Resources for Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA), Bond and CHS Alliance, https://www.chsalliance.org/files/files/PSEA_Info_final.pdf

‘transformational’ – participants noted that there is a difference between seeing safeguarding as a box-ticking exercise compared to ensuring it is embedded in all aspects of research. The workshop provided space to discuss the extent to which donors, organisations and established research practices enable a transformative approach to safeguarding.

Both gender mainstreaming and safeguarding in research can bring up ethical questions, so it can be difficult to separate the two. For example, if someone is threatened because their identity was revealed as a result of failures in anonymity and confidentiality procedures, this is a result of poor safeguarding and ethical practices. However, if research teams draw conclusions on a research topic that affects both women and men on the basis of interviews with men only (that is, no women were included in the sample), then this means gender has not been mainstreamed into the research process. This not only means that women’s voices have been excluded, but also that the research data is incomplete.

2. Lessons and recommendations

This section captures some of the lessons and recommendations from all the case studies discussed at the workshop. These are grouped into three areas: 1) composition of research teams; 2) engaging with research participants; and 3) ethics and the purpose of research.

2.1 Composition of research teams

Ensuring gender balance of teams – Gender balance is crucial when gender mainstreaming research. Working to ensure a balance of men and women, and ensuring diversity in staff is a crucial part of integrating gender analysis into all research. However, in some situations ethnicity, tribe, clan, caste, political affiliation, age, status and language might be equally important. Ensuring a diverse research team (whether in partnership or not) directly affects the quality of data collected. This should

Participants listen to a plenary speaker during the gender mainstreaming workshop in November 2018. Credit: Mike Bradford



be considered from day one. If researchers know from the start that women cannot be interviewed, it is worth considering how this can be mitigated and – if it cannot – whether the research should be conducted at all.

Gender expertise and consistency in teams – Teams benefit greatly from having gender advisers working with them. As reflected across a number of case studies as well as in the discussions, where teams were working closely with gender advisers, the research benefited. Non-specialist gender researchers should be adequately trained and accompanied in gender concepts and methodologies in order to support them to conduct research that mainstreams gender approaches.

Partnerships and consultancies – Striving for equal, mutually beneficial partnerships is primarily the responsibility of international NGOs. As emphasised throughout the workshop, relationships between international organisations and local partners can strengthen research processes and outputs, but can also be problematic if not handled carefully. When working with partners or consultants, it is important to include them as early as possible in the planning and design of research.

Health, wellbeing and safeguarding research teams – Practising self-care is important, but it is not always enough. Wellbeing and safeguarding is an organisational obligation that requires resources, a culture change and clear tools and mechanisms. What mechanisms exist to ensure that research teams have the opportunity to take time off, debrief and seek advice or help throughout the research process? Given the sensitivity of research topics, time pressures, security considerations, distance from home and numerous other challenges, it is essential that the health and wellbeing of researchers is taken seriously. Different organisations will have different ways of handling this, and it is important to listen to researchers to understand their wellbeing needs. Similarly, organisations need to ask what protections are in place to protect against bullying, sexual harassment, and sexual exploitation and abuse within research teams.

2.2 Engaging with research participants

Over-researched populations leading to ‘research fatigue’¹⁵ – Doing background research, including a literature review, ahead of a research project allows teams to assess the added value or potential harm they might bring. Knowing when not to go ahead is as important as knowing when to research. These are two different but related issues that came up in several of the case studies. When working in areas where many NGOs operate, it is worth asking whether or not another research project is necessary – something a literature review should help to answer. Is the context or population already over-researched? If it is, there are ethical issues related to involving populations in yet another research project. Doing so can lead to research fatigue – a sense that questions are constantly being asked, but the communities themselves do not benefit and nothing ever changes. Apart from the ethical considerations, this might affect data as well. If participants have been asked the same questions over and over, they are less likely to engage meaningfully in the research or feel they have a stake in it. These issues become particularly important where research is conducted on sensitive issues (for example, SGBV), which may cause re-traumatisation or harm. Researchers and others involved must clearly explain to participants what will happen with the findings and how they will be used.

Flexibility in KIs and FGDs – Build a research design that ensures as many voices as possible are heard. The case studies showed a number of benefits and drawbacks of these two methods of qualitative research.¹⁶ For research exploring gender issues in particular, researchers need to think about the composition of FGDs.

¹⁵ T. Clark, ‘We’re over-researched here!’ Exploring accounts of research fatigue within qualitative research engagements, *Sociology*, 42(5), 2008, pp.953–970, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0038038508094573?casa_token=9H-BUTLYKoGgAAAA:AEjhNGNyyZXk_PbPZwrhGb1TqcIC-JOwSVO5fgJ8IZt2uTZyLLw81tC1zU3ubDjqWbAzLJfsYtKC7

¹⁶ A useful overview of the difference between qualitative and quantitative research methods can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-in-health-and-well-being-overview/evaluation-methods>.

In some contexts, dividing groups according to gender might be appropriate; in others, it might also be necessary to divide according to age, marital status or ethnic group to seek more diverse perspectives. In other cases, it might be beneficial to have mixed-gender groups. Ultimately, decisions on FGD composition will depend on a deep understanding of the context. Similarly, KIs can be useful alongside FGDs. If researchers sense that some participants are more active than others, they can invite them for separate interviews to ensure that their views do not dominate. Giving quieter members of an FGD a chance to speak one to one with researchers through KIs might also generate important findings and make all members of the community feel more included.

Surveys vs open-ended research designs – Combining methods makes research more flexible and robust. There are multiple factors to consider when deciding on a research design. The workshop revealed benefits of pursuing both surveys and more open-ended questions. The benefit of the former is that it allows for clearer cross-site comparisons and for simple and clean answers, but on the other hand it is less adaptable and has limited scope to tackle deeper issues, particularly those of a sensitive nature. The benefits of more open-ended questions rely on the training of the researcher in terms of adapting questions in an interview setting, as well as having the time to analyse responses. A combination of both methods can be useful in many cases, where surveys can be used to map issues and open-ended conversations such as interviews can be used to delve deeper.

2.3 Ethics and the purpose of research

Research training – Ensuring researchers are trained builds capacity across the organisation. Rigorous and ethical gender research takes time and training. Investing in solid research teams will benefit future programming and organisational practice in the long run. For example, organising regular research training days for researchers, local teams and country offices should result in less

reliance on external consultants and advisers, ensuring that capacity is built and developed in country. These trainings should focus on all stages of research – design, data collection, analysis and dissemination.

Building ethical and safeguarding reviews into research – Ensuring that ethical and safeguarding considerations are embedded into research is about more than ‘compliance’.

One way to ensure that ethical considerations are part of research is to use ethical reviews. These often consist of a series of questions and considerations that researchers reflect on and gain approval for prior to conducting research. While ethical reviews can be onerous and time consuming, they can also be helpful in uncovering a range of issues researchers might not have considered otherwise. Research organisations should consider ways in which ethical and safeguarding reviews are built into their research at design stages. Doing so should ensure that safeguarding of research participants and researchers is properly considered.

Reflecting on the purposes of research – Always ask who benefits from the knowledge generated through research, and whether it is the people who are directly affected by the issues being explored. One important topic that came out of the workshop discussions was a broader reflection around the purposes of research. Participants discussed the skewed power relations involved in research and the entitlement researchers are afforded in relation to research participants. Workshop attendees wanted to know what the research was being done for. Discussions reflected on: who benefits from this research? Donors? Conflict-affected communities? Researchers? These are uncomfortable questions, and answers are rarely straightforward. Workshop participants clearly wanted their research to have an impact beyond publication in a report that might be of use only to policy-makers. How can the PRP and research organisations build in practices where communities themselves benefit from the knowledge they generate? Developing more participatory methods where communities are a part of designing research could be one way.

Another could be ensuring that research focus and design is informed by existing programmes and serves to inform and reinforce them. A third option could be ensuring that researchers return to research sites to share findings and any benefits that have come out of the work.

Beyond checklists, due diligence frameworks and specific methodologies, conducting ethical gendered research and embedding safeguarding into practices requires all researchers to recognise the unequal power relations inherent in their work. This is particularly important in the context of research in the Global South conducted by organisations and researchers primarily based in the Global North.

There are long-held traditions around 'researchers' and the 'researched' that shouldn't be left unchallenged in the context and legacies of complex power dynamics and inequalities.

This recognition becomes even more important when, as in the case of the PRP, knowledge is often co-produced through consultants and partners. The organisations involved in the PRP should carefully consider how these relationships work and how they can be transformed to be more equal. Understanding and seeking to transform these power relations should be central to all phases of research – from inception to dissemination.



Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. Our priority is people – we believe that everyone should be able to lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from insecurity and violent conflict. We work with people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider analysis, research, and surveys of local perceptions. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national, and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace.

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We make peace possible.

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International Alert works with people directly affected by conflict to build lasting peace. Together, we believe peace is within our power. We focus on solving the root causes of conflict, bringing together people from across divides. From the grassroots to policy level, we come together to build everyday peace.

Peace is just as much about communities living together, side by side, and resolving their differences without resorting to violence as it is about people signing a treaty or laying down their arms. That is why we believe that we all have a role to play in building a more peaceful future.

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